

## **SOME English Christmas Customs**

### **Advent - (Four Sundays Before Christmas)**

Advent is not widely celebrated in England, its celebration actually originated in Germany, although in the church calendar Advent is the official start of the run up to Christmas.

Two traditions that have caught on in England are the **Advent calendar** and the **Advent candle**.

The **Advent Calendar** originated in the 19th Century from the protestant area of Germany. Protestant Christian families made a chalk line for every day in December until Christmas Eve. Before long, commercial entrepreneurs started replacing the ephemeral chalk lines with printed calendars.

An **Advent candle** often has 25 marks on it, a bit of the candle is burned down by one mark each day. In some homes, 24 candles are kept, one for each night from December 1 through Christmas eve. One candle is lit for a while on December 1, then a new candle is added each day for the 24 day period. However, it is now more common to have four candles for the four weeks before Christmas.

### **Christmas Eve- December 24th**

In England less emphasis is placed on Christmas Eve than in other countries, much more is made of Christmas Day and Boxing Day. Carol singing, midnight church services and going out to the pub are some of the activities that many families enjoy (sometimes all three activities can be combined into one fun night out!).

Night time on Christmas Eve though is a very exciting time for young children. It is the time when Santa or Father Christmas comes. They hang up their stockings and go to sleep. Santa and his elves make all the toys for Christmas in his home in Greenland. On Christmas Eve he piles all of the toys onto his sleigh and rides across the sky with his 9 reindeer (Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner (or it may be Dunder), Blitzen and of course ... Rudolf!).

Traditionally on Christmas Eve mince pies and sherry (or milk) are left out for Santa and nowadays carrots are left for his reindeer. Most children are in bed way before midnight waiting for Santa to visit.

### **Christmas Day**

The origins of the now traditional Christmas Celebration, distinct from earlier pagan winter holidays, date to sixth century England. By the middle ages, it was a well established important holiday, with traditional pageantry, customs, music and feasting all its own. Customs from pre Christian days were incorporated into the Celebrations, and many still remain.

However in 1647, the English parliament passed a law that made Christmas illegal, all festivities were banned by the Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell, who considered feasting and revelry on what was supposed to be a holy day to be immoral. The ban was lifted only when Cromwell lost power in 1660.

In Britain, the Holy Days and Fasting Days Act of 1551 (which has not yet been repealed) states that every citizen must attend a Christian church service on Christmas Day, and must not use any kind of vehicle to get to the service. There are a large number of Britons who break this law every year. The law may have been intended to encourage humility by forcing even the wealthy to attend the church on foot, or perhaps it was simply to avoid the traffic and parking crush that universal attendance would otherwise have brought about.

### **Boxing Day**

In England Boxing Day celebrated on December 26th, is traditionally a time to give gifts to tradesmen, servants, and friends.

It originated in medieval times, when every priest was supposed to empty the alms box of his church and distribute gifts to the poor. Wealthy people indulged in huge Christmas feasts, and when they were finished, packed up the remains of feasts in boxes and gave them out to their servants. It didn't become widely celebrated though until Victorian England.

### **Christmas Crackers**

Christmas Crackers have been a part of the traditional British Christmas since 1847, when almost by accident, Tom Smith invented the cracker. They are used to decorate the table at dinner.

In its simple form a cracker is a small cardboard tube covered in a brightly coloured twist of paper. When the cracker is 'pulled' by two people, each holding one end of the twisted paper, the friction creates a small explosive 'pop' produced by a narrow strip of chemically impregnated paper. Inside the cracker there is usually a tissue paper hat, a balloon, a slip of paper with a very corny joke on it (for example: "What does Santa call his blind reindeer?" "No-eye-deer!" / "Where do fish wash?" "In the river basin!" / "What lies in a

pram and wobbles?" "A jelly baby!" ) and a small gift (usually a little cheap plastic thing e.g. a plastic ring or nail clippers).

The family will pull each other's crackers before the meal starts, this often involves crossing arms and pulling two crackers at once. The person who gets the "big end" keeps the plastic trinket. The paper hats are donned, and the jokes read out, accompanied by moans and groans at how awful they are. Then, and only then, can the meal begin.

## **Christmas Trees**

Christmas trees are an integral part of the Christmas decorations in most British households. Although it was always traditional to bring evergreens into the house the Christmas tree is another tradition borrowed from Germany, where it is said that German Martin Luther was the first person to decorate a tree with candles and bring it indoors to show his children what stars looked like at night in the forest. It didn't become popular in Britain until the nineteenth century, when Queen Victoria's husband Prince Albert introduced the custom from Germany.

Nowadays in the UK you will find a variety of trees, from real trees with roots that can be replanted after the festivities, to felled trees that get recycled, to plastic imitations that get unpacked every year.

## **Mistletoe**

Mistletoe was considered sacred by the people of ancient Britain. The Druid priests used it in their sacrifices to the gods. It was believed to have magical properties. People who met under a tree bearing mistletoe were forbidden to fight, even if they were enemies, and anyone who entered a home decorated with mistletoe was entitled to shelter and protection. Mistletoe may even have been part of Druidic wedding ceremonies. The Celtic people believed it had miraculous healing powers. In fact the name for mistletoe in the Celtic languages is all heal. Mistletoe could cure diseases, render poisons harmless, make humans and animals fertile, protect the house from ghosts and bring good luck.

In eighteenth century England mistletoe was credited, not with healing power, but with a different kind of magic. It was the magic element in the kissing ball, a special decoration used at Christmas parties. The kissing ball had a round frame that was trimmed with evergreens, ribbons and ornaments. Tiny nativity figures were placed inside it. For the finishing touch, a sprig of mistletoe was tied to the bottom of the ball. It was then hung from the ceiling, and party goers would play kissing games underneath it. A kiss under the mistletoe could mean deep romance or lasting friendship and good will.

The mistletoe's kissing tradition, according to one account, comes from the Norse myths. Friga, one of the gods, gave her son, Balda, a charm of mistletoe to protect him from the elements, but because mistletoe grows neither from the water or the earth, nor from fire nor air, it grows on trees, it held the power to harm Balda. One of the other god's arrows made of mistletoe struck Balda down, and his mother cried tears of white berries. She brought her son back to life, and vowed to kiss anyone who rested beneath the plant. Thus the kissing tradition began.

There is a limit to how much you can kiss under one sprig of mistletoe though. For each kiss a berry must be removed and once all the berries are gone - no more kissing!